

Teachers' Institute on Canadian Parliamentary Democracy

by Marc Leman

Launched in the fall of 1996 on the initiative of House of Commons Speaker Gilbert Parent, the Teachers' Institute on Canadian Parliamentary Democracy is an opportunity for social studies teachers from across Canada to come to Parliament Hill to experience the workings of our parliamentary democracy, to share insights and expertise with colleagues, and to learn about and exchange new teaching strategies in this important area. This article by the Co-ordinator of the 1997 Institute offers an insider's view of this unique programme of professional development for teachers.

In November 1997, sixty-five social studies teachers from across Canada and the presidents of the provincial associations of social studies gathered on Parliament Hill to participate in the second Teachers' Institute on Canadian Parliamentary Democracy. These teachers had been selected beforehand on the basis of their professional excellence by a committee composed of representatives of the teaching community. They came to Ottawa to experience firsthand the workings of our parliamentary democracy, to exchange views, and to learn about and develop new teaching strategies in this crucial subject area.

Origin and Highlights of the Programme

While various opportunities exist for Canada's youth to experience and witness the workings of Parliament,¹ few are offered to teachers. Yet, to teach effectively about modern Parliament and its intricacies, teachers must rely

on creative and firsthand materials. Moreover, to present information in a way that will make their students eager to learn more about this institution, they need to rely on innovative teaching strategies. With these principles in mind, House of Commons Speaker Gilbert Parent, who had a long career as a school teacher, launched this unique four-day professional development opportunity in 1996 with the support of the Speaker of the Senate, Gil-das Molgat. The inaugural session of the Teachers' Institute was attended by participants from all provinces. From all accounts, it was a resounding success.

The main goal of the Institute is to provide teachers with a hands-on experience of our parliamentary democracy and thereby stimulate them to implement and share innovative teaching strategies with colleagues in their schools and regions. Additional goals are to stimulate discussion and critical analysis of fundamentals of parliamentary democracy and the parliamentary system and to give teachers opportunities to share research, resources and methodologies as they develop effective teaching strategies. Networking is an important dimension of the learning process during and after the Institute. The idea is to foster a network of ambassadors who, in turn, will be able to assist teachers at the regional, board and school levels in developing and implementing new

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strategies for teaching students about parliamentary democracy and civic education. During the week participants are also introduced to the wealth of resources provided by Parliament and other federal agencies to enhance their teaching in this area.

Over four intensive days, teachers work through a busy programme of activities. These range from meetings and interactive sessions with Members of the House of Commons, Senators, experienced parliamentary staff and senior public servants; briefing sessions with the Speakers of the House of Commons and Senate as well as procedural officers of both Houses; plenary sessions on the public policy process, particularly the legislative process, and the role of the executive branch of government; and small group work on sharing ideas and developing teaching initiatives. Each group is chaired by a facilitator familiar with the programme who helps teachers articulate their parliamentary experience and begin development of effective pedagogical strategies.

Interaction with parliamentarians and staff is a vital component of the Institute and is rated highly both by teachers and politicians. Participants are given the opportunity to meet one-on-one with a Senator or a Member of the House of Commons, usually in his or her parliamentary office, to discuss such issues as personal experiences in the Chamber and in committee work; how issues are dealt with in their constituency or region; how personal beliefs, public opinion and party solidarity are balanced; and how the job affects family life.

Reactions of participants range from astonishment at the timetable and heavy workload of MPs, to pleasure at the witty and human dimension of politics, to new awareness of the fast, hectic pace of life on the Hill.

Prior to the Institute, teachers are asked to choose a parliamentarian they would like to meet. Sometimes participants are matched with parliamentarians who expressed an interest in meeting with teachers. Last-minute cancellation of a scheduled meeting because of an unforeseen parliamentary duty can also call for new pairings. The Speakers invite parliamentarians to meet the teachers and get involved in the programme of activities.

They are also told about the possibility of meeting the group of teachers at a dinner meeting held in the Hall of Honour on the evening of the first full day. The Speaker of the Senate invites Senators to have a breakfast meeting with the group of participants on the Thursday morning, before he addresses the teachers in the Senate Chamber on the role and functions of the Upper House.

The response of parliamentarians has been enthusiastic with respect to both sessions of the Institute. In November 1997, several Cabinet ministers and three of the



As part of the Institute, teachers are given an opportunity to visit an exhibit which includes audio, visual and printed information that they may be able to incorporate into the classroom.

five party leaders, notwithstanding their busy schedule, agreed to meet a participant! Similarly, in 1997, some sixty parliamentarians attended the Wednesday evening dinner meeting with the participants and more than twenty Senators came to meet the group of participants at the Thursday morning working breakfast.

The active participation of senior parliamentary staff invited to discuss their duties informally with small groups of teachers at a luncheon during the week, was extremely useful. Participants soon discovered these resourceful people and plied them with questions about the inner workings of Parliament.

Outcome and Products of the Institute

As part of the Institute experience, participants are required to work with colleagues to develop strategies for making use of the information and insights they gain during the week. On the last day of the Institute, teachers collaborate with other members of their debriefing groups to finalize a learning plan for implementation in their classrooms so as to enhance the understanding of parliamentary democracy. This exercise can take the form of a workshop plan, a simulation activity, or a lesson plan for use with social studies teachers, generalists, board or ministry officials, and students. Identified are learning objectives, expected outcomes, tasks to be performed, the resources and materials needed, teaching methods to be used, progress checks to be applied, and evaluation strategies. Participants and colleagues are invited to test the strategies in their own classrooms.

Participants in the 1996 institute tabled twenty project outlines on various topics related to parliamentary government and institutions. A selection of themes included "Canadian Democracy: Perception and Reality", "Conflict: the Adversarial Nature of Canadian Parliamentary Democracy", "Empowerment to Active Citizenship", "Checks and Balances Within the Canadian Political System", "Governing Bodies: Entering Images of Political Spaces", "Understanding the Two Canadian Ideological Axes", and "The Role of an MP". Several participants, individually or as a group, developed their outlines into full projects which they presented to the Institute in the summer of 1997.

As a follow-up to the 1996 Institute, three alumnae were invited back to share their experiences and the teaching strategies they had developed. They presented their projects in a plenary session where they answered questions from the audience. The three resource teachers also acted as facilitators of workgroups during the 1997 Institute.

A total of twenty-one teaching strategies, outlined in draft form, were submitted by participants at the 1997

Institute. Topics included: "The Future of the Senate", "Pageantry of the Senate", "Traditions in the Canadian Parliamentary System", "The Democratic Parliamentary Process in Canada", "Citizen Involvement in the Legislative Process", "How to Form the Best Possible Cabinet", "Your Politician: Myth vs Reality", "Who's Who on the Hill", "Backstage Question Period: a Behind the Scenes View"; "Our House: Showtime in the House of Commons" and "Confederation II, The Sequel"²

An Organizer's View of the Institute.

The Institute's programme is managed and co-ordinated by the Library of Parliament's Public Information Office (PIO), while the overall responsibility for the programme day-to-day operation lies with the Chief of Education and Visitors Services in the PIO. The Institute has at present 1.75 "full time equivalents" (positions)³ divided between a Co-ordinator and a Registrar.

In addition to overseeing the day-to-day administration of the Institute, the Co-ordinator's responsibilities fall into three main areas: programme development, action plan for partnership and sponsorship opportunities, and communications and liaison with both participants, parliamentarians, and presenters taking part in the programme.

The Registrar's principal duties include the production of advertisements and flyers for the annual promotion campaign inviting applications; the establishment and maintenance of a data base for processing applications and storing information on participants; the co-ordination of travel, meal and lodging arrangements; and the registration process.

In the weeks prior to the Institute and during the event itself help is needed to support the Co-ordinator and Registrar in various crucial areas such as logistics (including access to the buildings), meal planning (guest lists, invitations, confirmations seating assignments, dealing with caterers); liaison with parliamentarians' offices to arrange and confirm their participation in various activities of the Institute; resource fair coordination and general administrative support. This help is generally provided on a voluntary basis by staff from the House of Commons, the Senate and the Library of Parliament. The core team of the Institute at this point swells to ten people, with several others handling other tasks as they arise.

In addition, throughout the year a six-member Teachers' Advisory Committee (TAC) assists with the planning and development of the programme, selection of participants, promotion of the Institute in their regions and the review of products developed by participants. Members, who serve for two years on a staggered rota-

tion, represent the various regions of the country⁴ and offer a balance of the following experience: teaching in education faculties, developing curriculum, delivering professional development, serving on provincial social studies organizations' executives, participating in former Teachers' Institutes, and working on selection committees for teaching awards or initiatives. Half of the membership should be classroom teachers in social studies from elementary, secondary or CEGEP classrooms and both French-speaking and English-speaking communities are represented.

The Institute is supported financially by the House of Commons, the Senate and the Library of Parliament with generous support from its corporate partners, the CRB Foundation-Heritage Project and the Canadian Bankers Association, and its federal partners, the National Capital Commission and Government House. For 1997, two new partners came on board: a corporation, the Grand and Toy/ Hilroy company, and a federal government partner, Canadian Heritage.

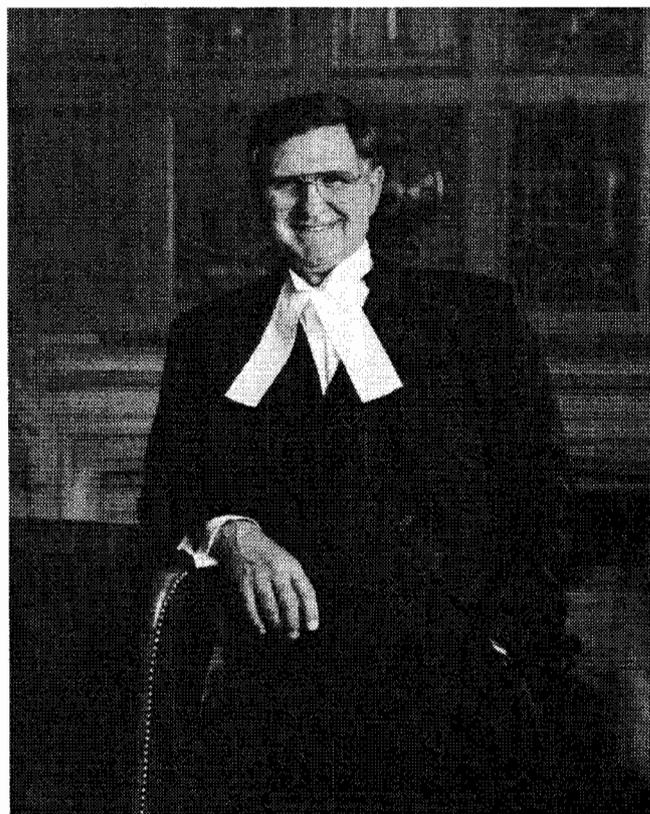
As a general practice, the Institute is held once a year, the first week of November, just before the parliamentary break for Remembrance Week. With the existing parliamentary calendar, this week is the best possible one for holding this event; the parliamentary activities, notably committee activities, are still at too early an organizational stage in October, while December, as well as being too close to Christmas activities, has weather that is so unpredictable, to organize travel for participants in far-away locations across the country. Holding the event in the springtime would conflict with the Forum for Young Canadians, a well-known and popular week-long event held on Parliament Hill for secondary school students and teachers.

The planning and co-ordination functions of the Institute can be divided into four main phases:

Determination of programme content: A two-day planning session is held following the Institute to debrief organizers on what worked well and what elements of the programme and/or of the logistics can be improved. Brainstorming ideas and concepts relating to Institute activities is an important item on the agenda. In addition to organizers and members of TAC, several other procedural and human resource people from the House of Commons, the Senate and the Library are invited to attend this meeting. Minutes of suggestions, conclusions and decisions are carefully recorded and used to further improve the programme activities for the next Institute. Key recommendations from the planning meeting of early 1997, were that future Institutes should include critical analysis and consideration of parliamentary democracy and presentations on the role of the executive branch in the policy-making process and on the functions

of the Governor General, emphasizing the role of the Crown as a constituent part of Parliament. With regard to promotion, a key decision was to invite applications from teachers in grades 4 to 12, a broader range than at the inaugural Institute. Another recommendation was to build a strong promotional campaign in Quebec and in the native and ethnic communities in order to attract more teachers from these areas.

Promotional Activities and Invitation of Applications: While promotion of the Institute is continuous, a concentrated advertising campaign is launched in the winter time. Advertisements promoting the Institute and inviting applications, are placed in a number of national educational journals, native education journals and newsletters, as well as in provincial education bulletins and newsletters with a wide circulation. The ads and flyers outline the Institute and criteria for selection of participants. However, since journals and newsletters are published at different dates from one province to another, it is not possible to get the ads running at the same time across the country. The promotion budget is relatively small, amounting to about \$ 3, 000.



The Speaker of the House of Commons, Gilbert Parent is a former teacher. He was instrumental in establishing the Institute.

Prices for ads vary from one publication to another, the national ones being the most expensive. A balance is sought between the various regions of the country in the publicity effort.

Flyers and application forms are mailed out to members of TAC and the provincial social studies association presidents who have developed a broad network of contacts in their provinces. They also go to social studies and native education consultants in several provinces, and to Canadian universities offering Native studies programmes. In the 1997 promotion campaign, social studies departments at Quebec's CEGEPs and private colleges also received promotional material. A brochure explaining the goals and activities of the programme is available for general promotion use and an advertisement, accompanied by an electronic application form, is posted on the Parliamentary Web Site⁵. During the spring, a memo is also sent to parliamentarians by the Speakers inviting them to promote the Institute in their mailings to their constituents and by circulating the flyers and ads provided to them in their riding. A camera-ready ad is put on file at the House of Commons Printing Services and Senate Reproduction and Offset Services for parliamentarians to use in their "householders".

Candidates are referred to the Library of Parliament's Public Information Office for application forms. Applications for the 1998 Institute must be postmarked no later than May 1, 1998.

The Selection Process: Some 236 applications were received from social studies teachers residing in all ten provinces during the spring of 1997. The strongest contingent of applicants, over 55 per cent of the total, came from the Western provinces, while Ontario and Quebec accounted for 27 per cent and the Atlantic provinces 18 per cent. Organizers credit this high number of applications from the West to a very successful promotion campaign in this region of the country. The central provinces of Ontario and Quebec were clearly underrepresented in the total number of applications received but the pool of highly qualified candidates was sufficient to yield excellent participants.

Out of the 236 applications received and examined by the selection committee, 70⁶ candidates from the ten provinces were chosen on merit for the excellence of their work⁷. Over half of the teachers came from the secondary level, the remainder were distributed about evenly be-

tween the elementary and middle levels. Three out of five participants taught in urban schools.

The selection committee, made up of teachers from eight of the ten provinces, elementary and secondary levels, teachers' associations, former participants, and urban and rural areas, met over the first weekend of June to evaluate all applications received. Divided into teams, panel members examined and rated candidates from provinces other than their own, according to several criteria, including teaching assignments, teaching experience, academic background, statement of support, involvement in curriculum and professional development activities and commitment to engage in professional or curriculum development following the Teachers' Institute. In addition, efforts were made to establish a balance with respect to teaching levels, gender, official languages,⁸ and urban and rural background.

Logistical Preparation of Event: Once participants are selected, they, as well as their principal and the superintendent of their school board, are officially notified by letter signed by the Speaker of the House of Commons. More detailed information about the Institute's programme of activities and an acceptance form, including a request to remit their registration fee,⁹ are also mailed to them.

As the summer progresses, the logistical preparation for the event gears up. Included are all arrangements for travel, lodging and meals for participants and resource people such as facilitators and presenters; confirmation and fine-tuning of all programme activities, including the preparation of all resource materials; and meetings with managers of House and Senate services to communicate various other needs. These needs encompass room allocation and set-up and maintenance; technical services, security and access to buildings in the parliamentary precinct; transportation; broadcasting and interpretation. As the Institute approaches, a logistical support team is struck to look after the thousand details that an event of this magnitude requires. Likewise, the tasks of communicating with parliamentarians' offices to arrange meetings with participants and confirm their acceptance of various invitations requires a great deal of time, diligence and perseverance. When the welcoming evening of the Institute finally arrives organizers have been keeping up a hectic pace of work and a brutal timetable for several weeks! Yet, when they see all the delighted faces of the participants on that first evening, all these efforts seem worthwhile.

Concluding Thoughts

While the short and long term impact of the Institute activities have not yet been evaluated¹⁰ tangible results

suggest some conclusions. First, participants have certainly gained an insider's knowledge of the complexities of Parliament, its players, functions and activities, by experiencing firsthand the workings of government. Many wrote to the Speaker of the House of Commons and the Speaker of the Senate to confirm that their understanding of Canadian parliamentary democracy had increased significantly through their attendance at the Institute. Most teachers also said they had gained an increased awareness of the resources, services and teacher support provided by Parliament and other federal agencies. Second, participants produced a collection of teaching strategies on various topics relevant to parliamentary government that they can share with their colleagues through networking. As an outcome of the first Institute, several teachers carried their work further to produce lesson plans and simulation activities based on the curriculum in their province. Three of these participants were invited to present and share their work with their colleagues at the second Institute. They had tested their innovative strategies in their classroom, so we know their product is effective. Third, we have heard through articles in education journals and newsletters that several teachers have given workshops in which they shared what they had learned at the Institute. They became "ambassadors" upon returning to their communities, expanding the reach of the Parliament Hill experience through resource development and workshop presentation.

Notes

1. Perhaps the best known programme is the Forum for Young Canadians which celebrated its twentieth anniversary in 1996. The week-long Forum provides young leaders with a practical understanding of the processes of government. Participants speak with decision-makers, watch government at work, and learn about each other's perceptions and concerns as well as their common interests and bonds
2. The outlines will be disseminated among the teaching community as possible tools for the classroom and as resources to support existing curriculum or to develop new leads in these subject areas.
3. This would amount to two positions if the time allocated for the Institute by the Chief of Education and Visitors Services was included
4. The terms of reference for TAC provides that "there shall be two representatives from the Maritimes and Newfoundland, one each from Ontario and Quebec and two from the Prairie provinces and British Columbia. Members will be selected from the regions to ensure that all provinces and territories shall be represented at one time or another".
5. Candidates can download and use the application form but cannot send it electronically to the Institute for processing.
6. Because of the teachers' strike in Ontario in 1997, five selected participants from this province chose not to attend the Institute.
7. The breakdown of selected participants per province was as follows: Alberta (8); British Columbia (16); Manitoba (3); New Brunswick (3); Newfoundland (4); Nova Scotia (3); Ontario (20); Prince Edward Island (2); Quebec (7); Saskatchewan (4).
8. The breakdown of participants according to official languages spoken was: 56 anglophones, including six bilingual participants, and 14 francophones, including 8 bilingual participants
9. For the 1996 and 1997 Institutes, the registration fee was set at \$200. This fee only covers a portion of the costs for travel, meals, hotel accommodation and materials for each participant.
10. A contract was recently concluded with an outside organization for an evaluation of the impact of the Institute's activities since the first session. The survey will address two questions of concern. First, to what extent are the resources, knowledge and strategies acquired at the Institute being utilized. Second, has the Institute influenced the ways in which participants teach about Canadian parliamentary democracy. The study will be carried out in 1998.